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To Members of the Commercial Fishing Industry,

In late April, the U.S. Coast Guard Fishing Vessel Casualty Task Force released a report titled "Living to Fish / Dying to Fish" and made 59 specific recommendations to improve safety within the commercial fishing industry. The report was written in response to the sinking of four fishing vessels off the Atlantic coast earlier this year, which resulted in the loss of 11 fishermen. The Commercial Fishing Industry Vessel Advisory Committee (CFIVAC), a committee comprised of commercial fishing industry representatives who advise the Coast Guard on fishing vessel safety matters, issued a response to the Task Force report and made a separate set of recommendations.

The Task Force report and the CFIVAC's response held widely different opinions on the solutions to the various safety problems facing the commercial fishing industry. Nevertheless, both the Coast Guard and the CFIVAC strongly supported several measures that could have a positive impact on fishing vessel safety and would not require creating new regulations. Measures that can be implemented immediately by the Coast Guard include:

- Reinforcing the value of a Voluntary Coast Guard Dockside Exam decal by increasing boarding emphasis on fishing vessels without the decal. Fishing vessels without a decal will receive a much more thorough safety examination when being boarded at sea.
- Ensuring that currently required safety training and emergency drills are being conducted. Compliance with existing regulations will be checked on all fishing vessels boarded at sea, regardless of whether the vessel has a decal.
- Providing fishermen who are issued a citation during an at sea boarding the opportunity to have a portion (or in certain situations all) of the civil penalties waived. By participating in a "Compliance Incentive / Fix-It Program," the Coast Guard will provide owners and operators the chance to bring their vessels into compliance with existing safety regulations without going through the civil penalty process.

Starting September 1, 1999 the above recommendations will be implemented by Coast Guard units in California. Other Coast Guard units in Oregon, Washington, Alaska and Hawaii will be adopting similar strategies within the same time frame. I am seeking your support of these initiatives and invite you to join me in this effort to improve fishing vessel safety by:

- Encouraging your members to improve the condition on their boats by participating in the voluntary dockside exam program,
- Stressing the need to conduct safety training and emergency drills,
- Recommending that your members participate in the Compliance Incentive / Fix It Program.

Commercial fishing continues to be a highly dangerous profession. While significant declines in fatalities have been made in Alaska over the last ten years, the fatality rate for California commercial fishers has remained constant. I'm sure you will agree with James Herbert, Chairman of the Commercial Fishing Industry Vessel Advisory Committee, that "current level of loss of life and vessels is not acceptable" and that the current situation needs to be improved. By working together, significant strides can be made towards reducing sinkings, injuries and fatalities in the commercial fishing industry.

I heartily welcome any input or questions you may have regarding this important matter. My point of contact for commercial fishing vessel safety issues is Mr. Dennis Robison, who can be reached at (510) 437-2947. Thank you again for your support.

Sincerely,

THOMAS H. COLLINS
Vice Admiral, U.S. Coast Guard
Eleventh Coast Guard District Commander

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